GALLERY 26

SOME IDEAS OF SPACE IN CONTEMPORARY ART

This exhibition attempts to present several different approaches to the problem of space in painting and sculpture by artists today. The Renaissance proposed a logical solution to the problem of suggesting space on a surface. It was based on the invention of linear perspective and then on the discovery of aerial perspective as well. But this relatively simple problem was replaced in the late nineteenth century by a consciousness of a far more complicated and difficult problem, to wit: the definition of space on a surface while at the same time causing the composition in depth to also function as a two dimensional arrangement. It was Cezanne who most clearly and effectively developed a kind of counterpoint of space and surface in painting. The Cubists continued his leads with modifications and many artists today continue to play subtle variations on this development.

The paintings of James Brooks almost invariably develop space and action by means of a masterly control of overlapping, superimposed planes and by sharply contrasted contours and softly blurred edges. Rythmical, swinging movements, floating forms, lines that seem almost awkward but which simply evidence an interest that is more concerned with the irregularities of nature and human gestures than with the rigid logic of geometry. Perhaps this implies a basically romantic position, but if so it is peculiarly cold and clear rather than hotly emotional.

Joseph Albers' experiments with color and geometry are very well known. Restricting himself to a few geometrical arrangements he has managed for years to create a seemingly endless variety of optical effects. The essence of this kind of visual experience resides in the most subtle adjustments of relations between shapes and colors. A central square may seem to advance out from the canvas, or recede into the distance, or do both alternately. A simple hue, yellow for example, can by reason of its relations with surrounding colors seem to sing, or to scream; it may help create an effect of stridency or harmony. Albers has demonstrated the infinite variety of possibilities open to the simplest of means.

Ellsworth Kelly's free shapes and assymetrical arrangements contrast with the severe symetry of Albers' "Squares" and "Variants." The clear, pure hues and chromatic tensions, however, follow in the best Albers' tradition. The almost painful vibrations sometimes achieved suggest a highly ambiguous space as contiguous areas of intense color seem to move in and out almost erratically. In other canvases an air of serenity

prevails. But the space involved here seems to be the actual space outside the picture plane. The surface is established by the least intense hue that appears in the painting. Those of greater intensity seem to advance out from this plane. It is an optical effect and perfectly logical but for the observer it often results in the feeling of being physically involved in the painting and at times even visually assaulted by it.

In the Renaissance tradition sculpture displaced space. The idea that it can define space thus making space one of the major elements of the sculptured form is also new. One of the most interesting pioneers in this field is Alexander Calder. This artist's mobiles have brought a radically new concept to sculpture - that of space defined by the movements of joined struts and shapes which move around it and through it thus presenting a visual analogy for the philosophical and scientific idea concerning the unity of space and time. The shapes, which are usually cut out of metal and attached to the wires and struts, are playful, fantastic and abstract. This art also defines certain modern attitudes concerning control, randomness, and chance in art - and by implication - in life. The various parts are joined in such complexities that they can move about in an almost infinite variety of combinations. And, an important factor, nature, in the form of random currents of air, always plays an important role in the movements that do occur. Yet, although the possibilities for various combinations of movement are enormous, they are limited and the artist still controls the general configuration of possibilities. Thus order and randomness, control and chance are joined in a final system which is the work of art.

Cezanne developed a counterpoint of spatial and surface composition on the picture plane. Someone once remarked that after Cezanne there would be no need for sculpture. Lee Bontecou has replied with a pictorial image developed by means of a space enclosing structure composed of welded metal rods covered with canvas. The space is more than just an enclosed void, however, the inevitable apertures provide a glimpse of dark inner regions which provoke feelings of ominous presence. At first it seems that one's disquiet must arise from a vague sense of lurking menace within. Finally, however, it appears that the cause for such feelings of dread is that within these complex and ordered forms there is finally nothing at all.

JOSEPH ALBERS

"Fall Finale"
Oil on canvas 1962

"Intersecting"
Oil on canvas 1959

"Variant: Red Orange Wall"
Oil on canvas 1959

Lent by Sidney Janis Gallery, New York

LEE BONTECOU

"Untitled"
Welded steel and canvas 1960
Lent by The Abrams Family Collection

"Untitled"
Canvas and metal 1959
Lent by Philip Johnson

"Untitled"
Pencil on paper
Lent by Katherine W. Merkel

JAMES BROOKS

"Denain"
Oil

"Fred"
Oil

Lent by Samuel M. Kootz Gallery Inc., New York

ALEXANDER CALDER

"Black Boomerang and Polygons"
Metal 1963

"Four Directions"
Metal 1959

"Black Pyramid and Seven"
Metal 1956

Lent by Perls Galleries, New York

ELLSWORTH KELLY

"Yellow White"
Oil

"Blue Green Red"
Oil

Lent by Betty Parsons Gallery, New York

Many of the works in this exhibition are for sale. For further information please inquire at the Information Desk or call Extension 331.